YES, BUT ARGUING IN READING AND WRITING

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ABSTRACT

One way of dealing with counterarguments is through *yes, but* arguing, a discourse strategy that involves a claim, a concession, and a return to the claim. If teachers understand *yes, but* arguing, they are better able to interpret student work and anticipate challenges in reading material. If students understand it, they can read with greater comprehension and write more persuasively. Examples of *yes, but* arguing from published writing and from student work show how it is marked and how it challenges students. If it is true that all academic writing is essentially argumentative, *yes, but* arguing becomes even more important.

INTRODUCTION

Textbooks that aim to teach argumentation typically advise students to anticipate counterarguments. A simple approach might advise "mentioning and responding to opposing views" (Leki, 1998, p. 239). A more complicated approach might include phrases like "anticipate objections," "counter opposing arguments," and "build common ground" (Hacker, 2007, pp. 72-73). In Raimes and Jerskey (2008, p. 53) students learn that a good argument "establishes common ground with listeners or readers and avoids confrontation" and that it "takes opposing views into account and either refutes them or shows why they may be unimportant or irrelevant." One way of taking an opposing view into account is to do what Kirszner and Mandell advise: "concede the strength of a compelling opposing argument" (2010, p. 555). That strategy—concession—is the focus of this paper.

WHAT IS *YES, BUT* ARGUING?

Yes, but arguing is not a conventional term in ESL reading and writing texts, but it transparently names a writing strategy that can help students understand what they read and make their writing more persuasive.[1] In *yes, but* arguing, you concede something to those who may disagree with you—for example, that they are well-intentioned or that their argument is at least worth considering. You may even concede that some of their arguments are sound. Then comes the *but*: You explain why you still think you are right. Troyka and Hesse, though they don't use the term *yes, but* arguing, explain it well in this advice to students:

> Concede an opposing point, but explain that doing so doesn't destroy your own argument. For example, you might decide to concede that governmental monitoring of emails could reduce terrorism. However, you might argue that the increase in saftey is not worth the threat to privacy and personal freedom. (2007, p. 163).

A *yes, but* argument is generally placed at a point after the writer's basic claim has been established. So we can understand *yes, but* arguing by recognizing three sequential parts: *claim, concession,* and *return.* A simple example highlights the parts:

[1] The concept of *yes, but* arguing, whether named or not, is a common feature of texts. I hope that giving it a simple name and summarizing my experience with it in advanced English for Academic Purposes classes may prepare teachers to incorporate it into their teaching. Since argument is an important part of spoken academic discourse as well as written, *yes but* arguing may be relevant to teachers who plan lessons involving discussion, debate, and presentations.

Ducks are the funniest birds. (claim) It's true that chickens are also funny. (concession) But no bird is really as funny as a duck. (return)

Below are some authentic examples with more developed content. Though the concession and the return appear in separate boxes, they originally appeared (in all cases) uninterrupted, except for a paragraph break in Example 7. To save space, I've expressed the claims as paraphrases.[2] The first example is from student writing (the final draft of an essay) and has been edited for grammar.

Example 1 (student writing)

Claim:	It's too difficult for international students to get a U.S. visa.
Concession:	"It is true that Germans have no problem getting a U.S. visa. I come from Germany and had a good visa experience. I made an appointment for an interview at the U.S. embassy, went for a short interview, and received my visa within a week. One classmate, from Japan, had nearly the same experience.
Return:	However, Japan and Germany seem to be exceptional cases. The visa application process in most countries is absolutely horrible…"

Example 2 (Kristof, 2002)

Claim:	The Chinese educational system has been phenomenally successful.
Concession:	"Of course Chinese education is still hobbled by rural mud-brick schools that are in a shambles, by peasants who pull their daughters out of school, by third-rate universities.
Return:	But China's great strength is that in the cities, it increasingly is not a Communist country or a socialist country, but simply an education country."

Example 3 (Ayres, 2001)

Claim:	The use of laptops by students in lecture classes should be discouraged, because laptops are a distraction.
Concession:	"Admittedly, students can mentally check out of class in other ways—for instance, by daydreaming or doodling.
Return:	But not all activities are equally addictive."

Example 4 (Stulman, 1999)

Claim:	Universities should be wary of overemphasizing technology, because students use computers more for goofing off than for academic purposes.
Concession:	"It is true, of course, that students have always procrastinated and wasted time.
Return:	But when students spend four, five, even ten hours a day on computers and the Internet, a more troubling picture emerges—a picture all the more disturbing because colleges themselves have helped create the problem."

[2] My use of paraphrasing allows me to express the claims in clear language that in some cases summarizes several sentences. I realize that this deprives readers of the chance to verify my interpretation.

Example 5 (Ho, 2007, p. 113)

Claim:	U.S. education is superior because it emphasizes creativity and self-expression.
Concession:	"There's no doubt that American education does not meet high standards in such basic skills as mathematics and language. And we realize that our youngsters are ignorant of Latin, put Mussolini in the same category as Dostoevsky, cannot recite the Periodic Table by heart.
Return:	Would we, however, prefer to stuff the developing little heads of our children with hundreds of geometry problems, the names of rivers in Brazil and 60 lines from The Canterbury Tales? Do we really want to retard their impulses, frustrate their opportunities for self-expression?"

Example 6 (Lohr, 2005)

Claim:	Google is a major threat to companies such as Wal-Mart and its competitors because it allows customers to search easily for the best prices.
Concession:	"Google, to be sure, is but one company at the forefront of the continuing spread of Internet technology. It has many competitors, and it could stumble. In the search market alone, Google faces formidable rivals like Microsoft and Yahoo. Microsoft, in particular, is pushing hard to catch Google in Internet search. 'This is hyper-competition, make no mistake,' said Bill Gates, Microsoft's chief executive. 'The magic moment will come when our search is demonstrably better than Google's,' he said, suggesting that this should happen in a year or so.
Return:	Still, apart from its front-runner status Google is also remarkable for its pace of innovation and for how broadly it seems to interpret its mission to 'organize the world's information and make it universally accessible and useful'."

As the examples show, a concession can be long and complex (even including a paragraph break)[3], and the return can take a variety of forms. In my example about ducks and chickens, the return is not much more subtle than "But I'm still right!" In the authentic examples, the more developed returns vary in how they relate to the claim, but all, in some way, support it.

HOW ARE *YES, BUT* ARGUMENTS FORMALLY MARKED?

Writers can mark both the concession and the return of a *yes, but* argument. Below are some concession markers, listed alphabetically, with punctuation they typically (not always!) exhibit.

[3] This example from van Creveld (2011) shows that there may even be multiple concessions before the return. (Emphasis is added.) "There are more differences than similarities [between the Libyan uprising of 2011 and events in other Arab states]. **True**, most Libyans are under 30 years old and youth unemployment is painfully high. **Granted**, many Libyans are justifiably frustrated by 42 years of a kleptocracy that squanders Libya's vast resource wealth and denies freedom of expression. **And yes**, increased access to the Internet and social networking sites has allowed the disenchanted youth to organize themselves in a way that can no longer be effectively monitored and repressed by the regime.

But this is where the key similarity between Libya and her neighbors end…"

Admittedly,
Granted,
It is true (that)
Of course
There is no doubt (that)
True,
To be sure,
Yes,

There are significant differences among these markers in terms of frequency, grammar, punctuation, and level of formality. They differ too in applicability to other contexts. That is, they may have uses unrelated to concession. Perhaps the expression that is most loosely tied to concession is *of course*, which serves to tell the reader "I know you know this." That message is not always tied to concession. Note, too, that *of course* can co-occur with another marker, as it does in Example 4.

As for the return, in most of the examples I have found, it is marked by *but*, less commonly by *however*. These two words, though different in terms of grammar and punctuation[4]) are both generally described as markers of contrast. Example 6 above uses *still*, which as a contrast marker is in the same grammatical category as *however* (a conjunctive adverb). There are differences among the contrast markers, but they are beyond the scope of this paper.

Other ways of marking the return are also possible:

Example 7 (Boyer, 1998, p. 150)

Claim:	Undergraduate classes "should be small enough for students to have lively intellectual interaction with teachers and fellow students."
Concession:	There are times, of course, when lecturing is necessary to convey essential issues and ideas and also to handle large numbers of students.
Return:	At other times, such a procedure seems inappropriate, especially when the class is small and much of the material being presented is available in the text.

Here the return is introduced by the phrase *At other times*, counterbalancing *There are times*. This return is less obvious than a return marked with *but* or *however* (both of which are likely to be familiar to students). It may deceptively lead the reader to think, "Both styles are fine, for different situations," when in fact the writing as a whole makes it very clear that the author strongly favors one style. I say this not to criticize the writing (it is, after all, an authentic example) but simply to point out that for an ESL reader, the argument might be easier to understand if the return began "But when the class is small…" or even "But most of the time, when the class is small..."

[4] As examples 2, 3, and 4 show, *but* often begins a sentence in the return of a *yes, but* argument. In book reviews, a reviewer may write a paragraph or two conceding that a book has some flaws (or strengths) and then to return to his or her general evaluation in a sentence, often a paragraph-initial sentence, beginning with *but*.

WHAT ARE THE PITFALLS OF *YES, BUT* ARGUING?

A student who doesn't recognize a concession marker may be confused about which side the writer is taking. Even students who do recognize concession markers may have difficulty following an argument in which a concession, as sometimes happens, is not overtly marked or is marked confusingly. (Example 7 might be a case in point.)

In writing, one pitfall is the failure to include the return. Making a claim followed by a concession, with no return, is indecisive at best and may confuse readers[5]. Examples of other pitfalls for student writers appear in the examples below, starting with an example from an essay test by a relatively low-level student (with spelling corrected). In this example, the problem is that *but* introduces both the concession and the return.

Example 8 (student writing)

Claim:	For a child, it's better to grow up in the country than in the city. [The writer gives some reasons.]
Concession:	"…but sometimes child needs higher education, or advanced environment, [implying that the city is better]
Return:	but, to child, young age, the things what I said are more important to child."

Because a concession is a kind of contrast, it's natural that the student introduces the concession with one of the usual contrast markers. But then the return is also marked with contrast marker—in fact, the same one. The reader's reaction might be to think, "Make up your mind!" Without going into the details of concession, I might advise the writer of example 8 simply to avoid *but…but*, perhaps adding an off-the-cuff oral example with multiple *but*s: *I want a new iPod, but I don't have the money, but I could ask my mom for it, but she might…* I might also suggest replacing the first *but* with *of course* (with an adjustment in punctuation).

A more sophisticated example shows the same problem. The student was reporting on her field research into the question of how much Americans care about their energy use. (All of the following examples are from drafts of student papers and have been edited for grammar. Again, the claims are my paraphrases.)

Example 9 (student writing)

Claim:	The results show that Americans don't care much about how much energy they use.
Concession:	"Nevertheless, one of the American respondents who is 'very serious' about energy consumption said that she tries to rely on her car less and is figuring out a route so she can bike or take the light rail to work. The same respondent said that she trieds to carpool as well. This is very understandable behavior,
Return:	but she only tries to do the things rather than actually doing them."

The *nevertheless…but* structure in this example is a more advanced version of the *but…but* problem.

[5] This is not to say that writers never fail to include a return. See, for example, footnote 2 in this paper, where a concession (marked with *I realize*) is final.

In published writing, concessions and returns are not always marked, as I have already suggested. But when a developing writer fails to mark a concession or a return, clarity can suffer. In example 10, neither the concession nor the return is marked:

Example 10 (student writing)

Claim:	The author [of a source essay] is wrong to claim that universities overemphasize computers and that students use them in inappropriate ways.
Concession:	"He has strong evidence that students use computers for 'activities that have little or nothing to do with traditional work,' based on observations he has made on his campus.
Return:	I believe that this evidence is too limited and does not represent the typical case on campuses around the country."

When I first read the draft from which this example is drawn, the lack of a concession marker made me pause for a moment to question whether I had understood the claim correctly.

Example 11, a bit more complex, might also give readers pause.

Example 11

Claim:	The author (of a source essay) is correct to claim that people in prison should be treated humanely.
Concession:	"At the same time, prisoners have given up their rights when they committed a crime. Before they committed a crime they knew that what they are going to do is against the law and if police find them they will go to jail. But still they did that action so now they need to bear the consequences.
Return:	But like I said physical brutality is not the answer."

At the same time does not work well to mark a concession. (It's a complex expression, sometimes indicating contrast and sometimes not; I haven't found an example in which it clearly marks a concession.) More confusingly, the concession itself (as I have analyzed it) also includes a contrast introduced by *but*. So again, there is a *but…but* problem. Another interesting feature of example 11 is *like I said* in the return. The student's use of this expression, though it may be too informal, is a worthy attempt to clarify that she is returning to her claim. With greater clarity in the other parts, however, she would not need any such phrase. My advice might be to mark the concession more clearly and to remove the first *but*.

A final pitfall, related to content, came up once when I introduced *yes, but* arguing a little too cursorily. The students got the basic point, but some wrote returns that were not well-connected with the concession and did not really show why the concession is irrelevant or unimportant. Like my ducks and chickens example, they were a little too simple for academic writing.

TEACHING *YES, BUT* ARGUING

I have taught *yes, but* arguing in both advanced grammar and advanced reading and composition classes. When I teach it in grammar classes, I usually teach it in connection

with a unit on connecting ideas. Advanced grammar texts typically present lists of expressions that mark meaning relationships, placed in groups that are synonymous (rarely) or similar. Yule (2006), for example, introduces categories of *adding*, *contrasting*, *result*, *time*, and *listing*. When I teach grammar with this text, I introduce *yes, but* arguing in relation to the *contrasting* group. I point out that contrast markers like *however* and *but* are sometimes used along with concession markers to form a larger unit, a *yes, but* argument. I encourage students to add the category of concession to Yule's list.

Like Yule, most grammar texts I have seen do not mention *yes, but* arguing, by that name or any other. I would like to see textbook writers recognize concession as a category of transition expression to include with the usual ones, along with examples to show how it is paired with a contrast marker. I know of one reference book—Swan (1995)—that does this.[6] Ackles (2004) lists *granted* as a transition expression but in a category identified as *contrast or concession*, along with *however*, *nevertheless*, *nonetheless*, and *even so*, with no differentiation among the expressions. At least one online resource, *Guide to writing and grammar*, includes concession as a category of transition expressions; it lists *granted*, *naturally*, and *of course*.

I sometimes find it helpful in a grammar class to discuss *although* along with *yes, but* arguing, pointing out that the concession markers I have identified serve the same function at the discourse level that *although* serves at the clause level. I may point out that a *yes, but* argument is like an expansion of a sentence with *although*, sometimes using one of my favorite nonserious topics:

> Although chickens are funny, no bird is funnier than a duck.
> Of course, chickens are also funny, but no bird is funnier than a duck.

These are not interchangeable (the second is much less likely to begin a discourse), but they may help students grasp how *yes, but* arguing works. At the same time, they provide an opportunity to focus on punctuation differences at the clause and discourse level. If the discourse-level nature of the example is not clear enough, the concession can be expanded:

> Of course, chickens are also funny. Try imitating a chicken and see how people laugh.
> But no bird is funnier than a duck.

The authentic examples I have seen remind us that multi-sentence concessions are typical.

Teaching *yes, but* arguing works best when it is approached through both reading and writing. In my advanced reading/composition classes, we get into the topic after a few clear examples have come up in readings. I introduce the term and begin using it to prompt students to include *yes, but* arguing in their writing and to solve problems that come up when they try. I point out that *yes, but* arguing can be part of many types of writing. Any time you say something that readers might take issue with, *yes, but* arguing is an option. As the title of one text (Lunsford, Ruszkiewicz, and Walters, 2004) puts it, *Everything's an argument.*

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[6] Swan (1995) has an admirably concise explanation. Under the topic *concession and counter-argument*, he points out the three-part structure (though not with the terms I have used). As concession markers, he includes *may* and stressed *do*—presumably as in *Chickens may be funny, too* or *Chickens **do** seem funny, too.* (In fact, other stressed operators could be included too: *There* **is** *some merit to this argument; however*…) For the counter-argument, he includes, among others, *even so*, *nonetheless*, and *all the same*.

When we concentrate exclusively on argumentative writing, we again look for *yes, but* arguing in readings. Looking for it forces a close reading that can help students with their overall comprehension. If they find it, we have another useful example. If they don't, we can discuss how it could be added. Identifying *yes, but* arguing continues to be a challenge for some students. Some latch onto just about any *but* or *however* and think they have found it, whether there is a concession or not. (Asking "What's the concession?" usually helps.) A concession marker (especially *granted*, *true*, and *to be sure*) is a more reliable indicator.

I sometimes encourage students to use *yes, but* arguing in the conclusion of an essay. (Example 4 above is the concluding paragraph of a published essay.) When students write conclusions that simply repeat what they have already said, I sometimes tell them that a conclusion should include something new but not something that demands more development. *Yes, but* arguing, done well, is a good way to introduce something new in a conclusion without opening up a new subtopic.

As I have pointed out, *yes, but* arguing can be situated in the larger context of dealing with counterarguments. It is helpful for students to consider this larger context as a way of sharpening their reading skills and expanding their repertoire as writers. Graff and Birkenstein (2006), though it is not targeted at ESL learners, has accessible discussions of counterarguments, including advice for dealing with them through concession, and even presents the phrase *yes, but* as part of a "template" for concession (p. 65). Like many texts, however, it is somewhat free in using a variety of terms—anticipating counterarguments, entertaining counterarguments, "planting a naysayer in your text"—that may confuse ESL readers. How and whether I devote time to clarifying terms depends on the material I am using, but I might point out that *seeking common ground* is a very general concept; it may be as sweeping as "We all want what is best." *Yes, but* arguing can be seen as one way of seeking common ground, but by definition, it involves a concession, which seeking common ground may not. As for *anticipating counterarguments*, *yes, but* arguing does show an awareness of counterarguments, but anticipating counterarguments is, like seeking common ground, a more general strategy. It doesn't necessarily involve a concession. A writer can systematically list all the arguments on the other side and refute them without ever conceding anything. Finally, there is the related strategy of *anticipating misinterpretation* (which I have not seen explicitly taught in textbooks), introduced by phrases like *I am not saying*, *That is not to say*, and *This does not mean*. This strategy may in fact overlap with *yes, but* arguing: *I am not saying that chickens are not funny. They are, but…* Overstreet and Yule (2001) discuss spoken-language "dislaimers" that are typically of this form.

AN EASY CONCEPT? YES, BUT…

When I introduce the term *yes, but* arguing—not just with colleagues but with students—heads usually nod. (Yes, some are dozing, but I like to think most are already beginning to grasp it.) Does that mean *yes, but* arguing is easy to understand? Yes and no. On the surface, represented by the simple name I give it, it's easy. And simple oral examples make it even easier. (*It is true that pop quizzes are annoying, but they motivate you to keep up, so take out your pencils!)* The idea of concession, however, is complex. When I *concede* that chickens are funny, I'm saying something that, to some extent, undermines my own position as a fan of Daffy and Donald. That's tricky. And *yes, but* arguing, like many language concepts in grammar at all levels, is a fuzzy concept. It may not be easy to agree on what constitutes a concession and on how a concession relates to the larger goal of acknowledging counterarguments.

The struggle to understand is worth it. In reading, students need to be able to track a writer's thinking, sometimes through a thicket of strategies that include *yes, but* arguing, seeking common ground, anticipating counterarguments, and more. In writing, students are often told to acknowledge both sides of an issue. In both reading and writing, understanding *yes, but* arguing can help.

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